Meet the new UQ Vice-Chancellor, Peter Høj, who was brought in to wipe the word `nepotism' from our minds

PETER Høj believes he is the man for the job of restoring University of Queensland's battered reputation following the 2011 nepotism scandal.

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SINCE the nepotism scandal of 2011 involving UQ's then vice-chancellor, the university has battled to restore its reputation. Peter Høj believes he is the man for the job.

It's a nice touch: not the ceremonial floppy hat on Professor Peter Høj's head, although it is rather jaunty, but the moment he asks the graduands to stand and thank their relatives. "Look at your loved ones and give them a well-deserved round of applause," the University of Queensland vice-chancellor says in his graduation address. The latest batch of medical professionals to emerge from these sandstone walls complies with gusto, whooping and hollering their appreciation.

Høj smiles at their heartfelt response. He knows the price many parents pay for their children's tertiary education: the budget-sucking fees and accommodation costs, the late nights of encouragement when their child underperforms, the aching desire to see the kid get along in the world. He also knows that, sometimes, parental aspirations go too far. If not for one influential father's unconscionable pulling of strings on behalf of his daughter, Høj would not be standing here today, the head of a university regularly ranked in the top three in Australia and in the top 100 globally.

It was his predecessor, Professor Paul Greenfield, who brought shame on the century-old university when it emerged he had influenced the enrolment of his daughter, Charlotte, into its Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery course. She was bright, an OP1 student, but rated below 343 other students worthy of a spot in the 2011 intake. She got in, they didn't. Greenfield quit late that year after word filtered out, as did his deputy, Michael Keniger. Charlotte was unaware of her father's meddling and remains in the course.

Enter Høj (pronounced Hoy), then vice-chancellor of the University of South Australia, an outsider brought in to wipe the word "nepotism" from our minds when we think of UQ. He wants us to think "excellence" and "innovation" instead, hammering that message in his speech. He tells the crowd about some of the prominent people who have passed through the university's doors: from outgoing governor-general Quentin Bryce to former High Court judge Ian Callinan; from internationally renowned cancer researcher Adele Green to Nobel Prize winner Peter Doherty. "None of us can foresee where our studies will take us, especially when we are young," he says. "You will never know your real potential unless you keep an open mind about new career and life directions and seize opportunities."

The urbane 56-year-old could be speaking about his own career trajectory: one that has taken a bright young scientist from the laboratories of Denmark to the lecture theatres, bureaucracies and boardrooms of Australia.

Peter Høj (pronounced Hoy), argues Australia needs to elevate the kudos of technical and further education institutions because “there are a lot of careers that are very satisfying, can give you a very good, stable income [and] that do not require you to go to university”. Picture: David Kelly

AS A YOUNG LAD SCRUBBING THE GUTS AND blood from the small fish and deer meat shop of his father, John, every night in Copenhagen, Høj was taken by how clean the floor was under where blood clots had settled. John, who had left school in Year 9, told his inquisitive son he would make plenty of money if he could figure that one out. Alas, scientists were already pondering such questions, leading to the development of the enzymes now found in washing powder.

But the brainteaser helped instil in Høj a curiosity about the world and how it worked, a constant theme with him. Adapting to change is another. His father had owned a large fish factory when Høj was born but, after Denmark removed trade barriers in the early 1960s, an influx of cheaper seafood from Chile killed the business.

“He had to close it and sell everything,” Høj says.

So, with three-year-old Høj and his baby sister Mette, John and his wife Bodil left their comfortable home and crowded into a tiny flat, all four sharing the same bedroom. It stayed that way for almost a decade as John rebuilt the business and Bodil worked shifts as a nurse.

There's still a hint of a lilting Scandinavian accent as Høj tells his story, even though he has lived in Australia for 27 years. He is a handsome, fit man with a dashing smile but there is

a reserve about him, as if he would be hard to really know. He has lived a big life, with great highs and deep lows. His colleagues have said in an in-house survey they consider him extremely competitive, a trait he did not realise he projected so readily. The keen cyclist reveals this shortly after telling how he broke his leg last year while testing himself against a young bloke who came flying past him on a bicycle. "I thought, I'll just check whether I can still keep up with him." Høj hastens to add that he could – it was on the return trip too fast around a roundabout that he came a gutser.

It takes a person with a singular focus on the job at hand to turn a broken leg into a sales pitch and Høj, it seems, is that kind of guy. "I want to emphasise that the number-one output we have as a university is 10,000 graduates [annually]. I fell off my bike and broke my femur … and I had nurses looking at me, people doing imaging … Then I was operated on, then treated by physios and that's when you see what we're really contributing. We're contributing the skills that allow us to run a very nice society. I broke my femur on a Sunday and I was out of hospital on Tuesday morning and back at work on Wednesday morning … All this doesn't happen unless you educate incredible people that innovate."

It was important for Høj to get back to work that week in September. The long-awaited Crime and Misconduct Commission report into the Greenfield nepotism scandal was handed down that Friday, ending a 21-month investigation that found senior staff had turned a blind eye to the wrongful admission of Greenfield's daughter and UQ had been secretive in its handling of the situation. Høj was annoyed at the time span of the investigation, making it "hard to move on", but he candidly acknowledges that the scandal helped his career.

"There is no doubt the university could have done without that. [But] there is no doubt [it] is strong enough to survive it … Has it been good for me?" he asks, without prompting. "Well, I'm very privileged to be here."

On top of that saga, Høj had to deal with "legacy issues" of allegations of academic fabrication by a one-time leading UQ researcher and revelations that hundreds of patients at the UQ dental school were sent for X-rays to businesses with financial connections to two senior staff members.

Hopes of a clean start in 2014 were dashed by another controversy, making the university look similar to Scrooge. On Christmas Eve last year, 399 disadvantaged students were told they had won scholarships. But they had not; it was an administrative error. The university retracted the offers days later. "It's very disappointing," Høj says, adding limply that those who were meant to have the scholarships received them. "You can say that that is the first thing that happened under my watch."

The fact the blunder hurt disadvantaged students was not lost on him. He knows a poor child can go places never dreamed of through higher education, having himself benefited from Denmark's free tertiary system. But his adoptive country is a different kettle of herring. University students here pay the third-highest fees in the OECD and expect top-notch education – even though, in the spirit of a fair go for all, there are more of them coursing through the system as a result of the demand-driven funding scheme introduced

by Labor in 2012. At the same time, research funding for UQ was cut by about $100 million over three years. To keep its reputation for fine graduates, which helps attract ultra-important research dollars and develop world-class innovations which, in a great circular motion, leads to more research dollars and fine students, UQ must do more with less.

It's a heavy load, even when your salary package borders on $1 million annually. "With a few exceptions, the time you could spend in a role such as mine is no longer going to be decades," Høj says. "I reckon you will be burned out by then."

Just as well he thrives on a challenge. The thrill of achievement came early for Høj who excelled at high school, becoming dux. He points this out several times, even writing down this almost 40-year-old award in my notebook when I ask him for the correct spelling of Birkerød Statsskole (his state school). "It's not important," he says, scribbling away. Most people assumed he would study medicine but "I felt if I wanted to know how the world really works, nothing could be better than a science degree".

He blitzed his biochemistry and chemistry studies at the University of Copenhagen, achieving grades so good that he was one of 20 students from all disciplines out of a cohort of 25,000 to be selected to live at the venerable Valkendorfs College, smack-bang in the heart of the Danish capital. A Master of Science in genetics at the prestigious Carlsberg

Laboratory followed and it was in this hothouse of scientific discovery filled with clever minds from around the world that he met his future wife, Robyn van Heeswijck. She was an all-round achiever from northern Sydney's Pittwater, bright, sporty and adventurous, who was working on her PhD. They married, had two children (son Torbjørn, now 30, and daughter, Stine, 27, both doing PhDs) while he took the plunge to start his doctorate in plant biochemistry in a start-up laboratory at Denmark's Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University. By 1987, they had finished their PhDs and "we were ready to fly".

"After seven years in Denmark, Robyn thought it was just too cold and miserable," Høj says. "She was a surfie, she missed that and she said 'you have to do three years in Australia and then we can decide where we want to live'." She went to University of Melbourne, he to La Trobe, partly on a Danish scholarship. He was expected to go back. "I never did, because I really got to like this place."

Within a year, he had his own laboratory and a tenured professorship at La Trobe. In 1992, he won the Boehringer-Mannheim (now the Roche Molecular Biochemicals) Medal, then awarded to outstanding biochemists and molecular biologists under the age of 40. "I guess I was seen as one of the very fast-moving, upwardly mobile young academics in Australia," he says. "Very soon after that people started to contact me to move to other universities," Høj adds. "It's just one of those kicks you're sometimes lucky to get."

He accepted an offer of one of those who came knocking, the University of Adelaide, becoming foundation professor of viticulture in 1995. Høj knew little about the world of vineyards and wine chemistry but he believes in trying new things.

"I do think too many people narrow or limit their career opportunities out of fear," he says. "If you have fear, you don't see opportunities passing you by because you have blinkers on."

Two years later he was on the move again. This time it was riskier, leaving academia, and a guaranteed job for life, for industry as managing director of the Australian Wine Research Institute. What did his academic colleagues think? "'He's lost his marbles'," says Høj, who, by the way, favours a strong-bodied Australian shiraz. "Some of them felt, 'Why is he throwing away his career?' whereas I saw it as giving credibility to academia in

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industry." Encouraging more PhDs to work in industry is a pet topic.

But soon Høj's "courage" in taking the plunge paled next to what his wife faced, when in the late '90s she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Van Heeswijck had forged her own stellar career in plant and microbiology research and was lecturing at the University of Adelaide, had trekked Kokoda in 1979 long before it became a trend, and walked to the polar cap in Greenland when pregnant with Tobjørn. "You couldn't stop her, a good Aussie girl," Høj says, but she could not beat the cancer. After a lengthy fight, van Heeswijck died in September 2003, aged 47.

"Look at your loved ones and give them a well-deserved round of applause," the University of Queensland vice-chancellor says in his graduation address. Picture: Liam Kidston

UNDER A CEILING DECORATED BY IMAGES OF chromosomes, scores of secondary students with a love of science have piled into a lecture theatre during the holidays to hear Høj spruik the value of a UQ education. He rarely gives lectures nowadays but is good with the teenagers, engaging and lively, eliciting a laugh when he tells how science helps a person develop a good "bullshit detector".

His core message is to aim high. "Every single time you think science won't deliver, it beats you, it does much more," he says. He holds up his "very old-fashioned iPhone" and tells them the memory in that phone would have cost the equivalent of $3 billion in the earliest computers we bought as word processors in the 1980s. "Everything beats you and evolves."

Innovation and research across a range of fields is one of UQ's trump cards, boosted by the $100 million-plus donated by US billionaire Chuck Feeney's Atlantic Philanthropies to fund top facilities. "In 2012, we were number two in Australia for research income [at $368

million a year], just after Melbourne University," Høj says, adding that federal funds bumped up that amount to more than $500 million. "UQ is arguably the most successful Australian university in commercialisation terms."

He lists a few winners. About 70 per cent of the world's MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) machines have UQ technology in them; the Gardasil vaccine to prevent cervical cancer developed by Professor Ian Frazer and the late Jian Zhou at UQ has since been dispensed to more than 100 million people; and the Triple P parenting program created by UQ's Professor Matt Sanders helps about four million children in 25 countries and is "probably the most successful social science commercialisation in the world".

Some of those successes were achieved partly through grants from the Australian Research Council (ARC), the federal government agency for whom Høj was CEO before becoming UniSA's vice-chancellor in 2007. He took the Canberra-based job in 2004 after van Heeswijck's death.

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"I was not in a good way," he says. "Every day I walked into the research precinct [at the University of Adelaide where their offices had been], there was something missing. I had to get out. It wasn't good for me, it wasn't good for the kids."

He'd been blooded for government work during his seven years with the Wine Research Institute, as a private member on the Prime Minister's Science Engineering and Innovation Council during John Howard's leadership. "I think they liked what they saw," he says of landing the ARC job.

Academia had its doubts. "Some of them in the universities said, 'Who's this guy? They've made a mistake. We don't want somebody who hasn't held an ARC grant for years'." Had he won many when in academia? "Oh, many. Very successful."

His time distributing about $400 million of government money annually helped him develop a strong respect for senior public servants, "incredibly hard-working, dedicated people", and the process of government, even though it was one of the most turbulent times for the ARC. The then education minister, Brendan Nelson, stirred controversy by vetoing some grants in the humanities and then removing the entire board, making Høj

answerable directly to him. Høj fronted senate estimates hearings to be grilled by then opposition education spokesman Kim Carr.

"It's a learning experience about being truthful but also understanding what your role is, vis-à-vis your employer, the government and the opposition," he says.

He offers a Yes Minister-style response about whether sacking the board was a good thing

He offers a Yes Minister-style response about whether sacking the board was a good thing and laughs when I tell him he still has some of the bureaucrat in him. “If you work as a senior public servant, the privilege you have is to give the best advice you can give to elected representatives so they make the best-informed decision they can,” Høj says. “However, once they make the decision, if you disregard that decision-making and do not work to implement it, you are actually saying, ‘I don’t believe in democracy’.”

He might soon have another government shake-up to deal with at UQ. About now, Education Minister Christopher Pyne, who has previously mooted reintroducing caps on university places, will receive a report reviewing Labor’s demand-driven scheme. The system has drastically improved access to a university degree but, on the flipside, put pressure on the federal government’s bottom line and university resources. It is a “difficult, difficult debate”, Høj says, acknowledging his own unfettered access to a tertiary education. However, he is “not convinced of the need to have a higher proportion of Australians going to university”. Labor had a target of 40 per cent of people between 25 and 34 years of age, and it is now about 37 per cent. In the 1970s, it was 3 per cent. Høj argues Australia needs to elevate the kudos of technical and further education institutions because “there are a lot of careers that are very satisfying, can give you a very good, stable income [and] that do not require you to go to university”.

“Should there be caps [on university student numbers]? If you don’t want students to pay more and more to go to university, then it follows that, by having an uncapped system, the government will pay a lot of money but it will be distributed among a very large number of students,” Høj says. “There comes a time when you can’t provide the quality of education that we expect our graduates to leave with. There’s no magic pudding.”

Other big issues needing to be broached include welcoming more overseas students. When collared by people who say foreigners should not take “our” places, Høj hits them with maths. He tells them a university receives about $10,000 in Higher Education Contribution Scheme fees and $1900 from the government for an Australian business student annually. “There is no way you can run a quality university education on $12,000 per student,” he says. International students pay up to $35,000 annually for such a course, with UQ receiving $300 million from fee-paying foreigners across all faculties. “The Australian student should turn to the international student and say, ‘Thank god you’re here, not only because you enrich our environment but, because if you were not here, I couldn’t be here’.”

Peter Høj argues Australia needs to elevate the kudos of technical and further education institutions. Picture: David Kelly

HØJ'S OWN STUDENT DAYS ARE LONG GONE but he's glad he's here. He feels privileged to have been so well received in Australia. "My journey to Queensland has only reinforced what a fantastic place this is to live." He intends to become an Australian citizen, a move he has not made because "I didn't want to do it to my mother. She always lived in a dream that her son was a Dane and I'd be back." Bodil died in Denmark late last year, having outlived her husband, John, by many years.

Mixed with that sadness is the joy in finally living in the same state as his partner and fellow academic, anthropologist Professor Mandy Thomas. They worked together at the ARC and, after she left to become pro-vice chancellor of the Australian National University (he'd rejected an ANU offer first, Høj explains), he phoned her up for a meal. Love blossomed but it had to be long-distance when Høj moved back to South Australia. "When it became clear I'd got this job, we were pretty pleased because there are other good universities in Queensland and Mandy was clear she certainly didn't want to work for me again. She'll be happy to be quoted on that." Thomas is now Executive Dean of the Creative Industries faculty at the Queensland University of Technology.

Keen travellers, with trips to the Galapagos Islands, Mt Everest base camp, the game parks of South Africa, the Milford Sound track and the grand circuit in Tierra del Fuego in Patagonia already under their belts, they came to Queensland via the Outback. "I wanted to understand how big Queensland was. So we drove from Adelaide up to Tennant Creek, turned right, ended up in Mount Isa and then we took the route down through Longreach, through Blackwater and then Rockhampton. Big, big state."

Now the head of its leading university, Høj is keen for the nepotism scandal that brought him here to become an unfortunate blip in the past as he builds on UQ's century of successes. He wants to double the $100 million of industry investment in research in seven years, engage more with Asia, "most likely" establish a UQ campus in China and improve online courses, which he says will create more flexibility and cost-savings. "This is a powerhouse, not only a Queensland institution but a national institution … and you can't

take that for granted, you can't let that slip," Høj says.

Universities have evolved into highly competitive businesses, he says, and "anybody who understands the macro-economics of Australia knows it's not going to get easier". To be successful, a university will need to proactively seek investment from all fields, "not sit and say, 'why doesn't anybody come?'" Høj believes his experience in academia, industry and government could give UQ an edge. "Time," he says, "will have to show whether this is true."